



May 2021

Dear WARG Members,

An update on the recent committee meeting.

As we are still unable to return to actual meetings, the committee considered the continuing use of Zoom for the monthly meetings.

Whilst actual meetings are generally preferred, the use of Zoom has been an undoubted success, with lots of positive feedback from members, and with attendance exceeding that at the Cinema gatherings. Zoom also allows members to record the meetings to view later if they are unable to attend on the day. Additionally, we are able to place some recordings on YouTube for a limited period, which we hope will attract an increase in membership.

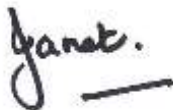
It was therefore decided we should continue to have virtual meetings into the summer whilst restrictions remain in place, and to compensate for loss of summer activities, with the exception of August when we hope to dig. We shall also be looking into having our annual picnic in August or September, restrictions permitting.

The first YouTube event attracted more than 100 'hits'. All talks placed on social media do require permission of the speaker, so consequently some may not be available for reasons of copyright.

We shall make this clear on the talks programme, and Maureen will add this to the talks invitation. All will of course be scribed for the newsletter as usual.

So why not make sure you do not miss out and, if you can, join us on May 10th for the talk on Medieval Building Myths. If you are the only person in the country who has not yet Zoomed, take it from a rank amateur – it really is easy and quite painless. Download the free app onto your device. On the night, click on the link Maureen sends and follow the instructions on the screen. Steve will then ‘open the door’ and welcome you in. I shall be ‘sitting in front of’ the Coliseum at the next get together and you can be seen and talk as you wish, or don’t wish..

Take care and stay safe.



A Lollipop for when birds do sing

“As full of spirit as the month of May, and as gorgeous as the sun in Midsummer.”

William Shakespeare Henry iv part 1 Act iv scene 1

Now is the month of Maying and yet again, we inherit our festivals as a mix and match from the ancients. Initially, at this time, the Celts celebrated Beltane as the most important day of the year which

divided the year between light and dark. The ritual of symbolic fire celebrated the return of life and fertility. Beltane is a Pagan holiday, which falls about halfway between the spring equinox – Ostara, and the summer solstice, Litha.

Then the Romans invaded the British Isles, and they brought with them their five-day celebration known as Floralia, devoted to the worship of Flora, the goddess of flowers. This took place between April 20 and May 2, and eventually merged with Beltane.

Beltane, and subsequently May Day, celebrations are deeply connected to the earth's cycle of birth, life and death, holding pagan values – focusing on the power and energy of the natural world. Beltane was also a Druidic ritual when sacrifices by fire were made from a pyre of bones, symbolising the birth of the new season. These sacrifices were usually puppets – made of straw or wood from the forest – and were known as the 'May King'.

Like the festival of Floralia, Beltane and May Day are deeply rooted in agriculture and filled with dancing and singing. Cattle were driven to pasture, special bonfires were lit, and both doors of houses and livestock were decorated with yellow May flowers – hence, 'bringing in the May'. There was also the weaving of floral garlands, the crowning of a May king and queen, and the setting up of a decorated May tree, or Maypole, around which people danced. Such rites may originally have been intended to ensure fertility for crops and, by extension, for livestock and humans, but in most cases this significance was gradually lost, so that the practices survived largely as popular festivities or maybe, just an opportunity for lads and lasses to get together.

The exact origins of the Maypole remain unknown but can be traced back to medieval times. Historians believe the first maypole dance originated as part of a fertility ritual, which seems to be the focus of most ancient celebrations, where the pole symbolized male fertility and baskets and wreaths symbolized female fertility. Who would have guessed! Originally, the Maypole was a living tree around which the ancient Celts danced, praying for good crops and fertility. For younger people, there was the possibility of courtship. If paired by sundown, the courtship continued so that the couple could get to know each other and they married 6 weeks later on June's Midsummer's Day. This is how the "June Wedding" became a tradition.



Children in Somerset rehearsing a maypole dance, 27 May 1953.



Hampshire children maypole dancing
May 1987 © Janet Backhouse

© (Photo by Express/Express/Getty Images)

Three-Milkings Month was the Anglo-Saxon name for the month of May. The Venerable Bede (673 AD–735 AD), one of the greatest scholars of the Anglo-Saxon period, notes in his work **De Temporibus**, (On Time) in about 703, that May was so named because cows could apparently be milked three times in one day during this month.

Unusually, May Day was not vehemently opposed by the Christian Church, but it did face opposition. For example, in 1240 the bishop of Lincoln was furious that some of his priests enjoyed May Day celebrations, which were steeped in the pagan tradition the Christian church was seeking to override. May day subsequently developed into a secular celebration – centred on labour, farming and the cycle of the seasons – rather than a Christian one. Hopefully the ‘naughty’ priests were then allowed to enjoy themselves singing and dancing.

In *The Knight's Tale*, Geoffrey Chaucer mentions woodbine and hawthorn as decorations. Circa 1387-1400

Line

1505 **And to the grove of which that I yow tolde**
 And to the grove of which I told you

1506 **By aventure his wey he gan to holde**
 By chance he began to hold his way

1507 **To maken hym a gerland of the greves,**
 To make himself a garland of the branches,

1508 **Were it of wodebynde or hawethorn leves,**
 Were it of woodbine or hawthorn leaves,

1509 **And loude he song ayeyn the sonne shene:**
 And loud he sang in the bright sun:

During the interregnum period from 1649, unsurprisingly, May Day was banned – considered to be another frivolous and blasphemous celebration. However, like much of the frivolity and joy that was banned by the Puritans, it was reinstated during the Restoration period under Charles II.

May Day continued to be a civic celebration and developed further as a festival for labourers, farmers and farm workers such as milk maids. This is apparent in a ballad from 1630 that contains a final verse “In honour o’ th’ milking paille”.

John Lydgate’s 15th C poem *Mumming at Bishopwood* speaks of “mighty Flourra, goddes of fresshe floures”,

A May Day traditional beauty treatment

Women and girls would rise early and wash their faces in the May morning dew, which was believed to make them radiant, reduce blemishes and attract their future spouse. Allegedly, in 1515, Henry VIII’s first wife, Catherine of Aragon, took her ladies out in the early morning to bathe in the May dew for its healing benefits.

Does anyone know if this works?

So – to alle estates here present, fare you well

to quote from John Lydgate’s *Mumming at Bishopwood*

May is nowe comen tofore yow of entent

To bringe yowe alle to joye and fresshnesse,

Prosparitee, welfare, and al gladnesse,

And al that may youre Hyenessse qweeme and pleasee,

In any parte or doone youre hertes eese.

Ref: Carr. H (2021) Histroy Extra The official website for BBC History Magazine and BBC History Revealed online at <https://www.historyextra.com/period/medieval/may-day-history-origins-celebrate-pagan-bank-holiday-maypole-facts-explain/> 28/04/2021

[History.com Editors](https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/history-of-may-day) (2021) History Pub A&E Television Networks Online <https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/history-of-may-day> 28/04/2021



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